

Islamic State: Understanding the Threat in Indonesia and Malaysia

Abdul Mateen Qadri; Adri, Wanto

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Islamic State: Understanding the Threat in Indonesia and Malaysia

By Adri Wanto and Abdul Mateen Qadri

Synopsis

As IS continues to grow as a global threat, Malaysia and Indonesia face the task of how to deal with their followers both domestically and regionally.

Commentary

SINCE ISLAMIC State (IS) proclaimed itself to be a worldwide caliphate on 29 June 2014, the group successfully presented itself to Malaysian and Indonesian Muslim audiences as a new, dynamic outfit that has promulgated an Islamic state that applies 'Islamic law' in full and in its purest form. According to Indonesia's National Anti-Terrorism Agency's (BNPT) data, more than 500 Indonesians are estimated to have left the country to join IS. In Malaysia, more than 100 suspects have been arrested since 2014 for being involved in extremist or terrorism-related activities.

Given the transnational nature of terrorist networks, the IS threat in both countries has an impact on each other. The BNPT's chief recently warned of the imminent deployment of foreign terrorist fighters from Malaysia. In an interview, Saud Usman Nasution expressed his trepidation that IS was working with smugglers to bring foreign fighters into Indonesia. He noted how these terrorists come from Malaysia and are taken to Poso in central Sulawesi, a suspected IS training ground. Most worryingly however, he noted that: "There is information that in Malaysia there are thousands, a lot of foreign terrorist fighters there who are about to be deployed — we don't know where to — under the IS network."

Why they are joining IS

The increase in the number of Malaysian and Indonesian citizens committing

themselves to the IS cause can be attributed to a few reasons. Firstly, they have been attracted by the extensive IS propaganda available on social networking sites. Secondly, the Internet has made the IS magazine, Dabiq, accessible to a wider audience. IS has also begun to produce a narrative targeted towards South East Asian audiences.

The 4th Issue of Dabiq included an advertisement-style spread of South East Asian men. Recruitment videos in Malay (which is comprehensible to Indonesians) have been widely used. IS has set up a specific Malay-speaking unit to welcome new recruits. This however does not explain why some Malaysians and Indonesians are attracted to the narrative that IS provides. To answer this, we need to comprehend the social and political milieu existing in both countries.

IS and Malaysian politics

The long-ruling United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) government has coopted Islamist politics to garner support and to counter the political threat from the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS). The Islamisation race between UMNO and PAS, which has been taking place within the context of a broader Islamisation process, has created an environment conducive to the emergence of a radical fringe.

Leaked social media accounts have shown that there were a number of Malaysian IS militants who were supporters of the ulama wing of PAS. The late Kedah PAS Youth information chief Ustaz Lotfi Ariffin triggered controversy in 2014 when he disclosed his involvement in extremist campaigns. PAS has continued to deny any involvement or support for extremist causes.

PAS has long championed its intention of implementing an Islamic state governed by Shariah law. It has been unable to do so both in Terengganu and Kelantan to some extent. It is possible that some fervent supporters of the notion of the “caliphate” have lost faith in the ability of PAS to achieve this and have decided to join IS and its “caliphate”. Given that UMNO has been saddled by the 1MDB crisis and allegations of corruption, it is likely that some supporters have become disenchanted by these allegations and turned to support what they perceive as a more “true” and “just” Muslim leader.

Ignorance is ‘not’ bliss

IS is an organisation that is built on the foundation of narrow and dogmatic interpretation of Islam that the Malaysian and Indonesian governments have allowed to develop over the decades. With their emphasis on a strict, legalistic, and exclusive understanding of Islam, the radical Islamist groups in both countries have attempted to divide society into “the house of Islam” (*Dar al-Islam*) and “the house of the enemy” (*Dar al-Harb*), resulting in the perception that non-Muslims are permanent “enemies of Islam”.

In the case of Indonesia as a democratic country, some Islamist groups such as the Mujahidin of Eastern Indonesia (Mujahidin Indonesia Timur, MIT) based in Poso, Central Sulawesi; and Abu Bakar Ba’asyir’s Jamaah Anshorut Tauhid (JAT), have been peacefully promoting such radical ideologies to the Indonesian Muslims for

more than a decade. Some Indonesians may be embracing the Islamist groups' ideology without joining the organisations formally. In the last decade, the Islamists have successfully influenced a more radical interpretation of Islam on the part of some Indonesian Muslims.

As such, some scholars have argued that the Indonesian government needs to act decisively to bolster efforts to prevent the proliferation of the IS' ideology by banning Islamic websites that support IS' ideas. Moreover, they also suggested that Indonesia has to push for stronger regulations by adopting the model of Malaysia's Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA) in which IS supporters can be charged and detained for having the intention to fight in Syria and Iraq. Based on the existing Indonesian law, supporters of IS cannot be arrested or detained, and it is not illegal for Indonesians to travel overseas for military training. This is an important point to note in countering the IS movement in Indonesia.

The law enforcement approach and stronger political action is needed to break up the IS network in both Malaysia and Indonesia. However, such an approach will only address the problems on the surface. Meanwhile, the root cause, that is, ideology, will remain unresolved. In addition to law enforcement, there is a need for both countries to build a new counter-ideological approach which strongly advocates a deeper understanding of Islamic teachings.

In the case of Indonesia, Islamic organisations, such as Nahdhatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, have started to steer the Islamic discourse towards a path of moderation. Conversely, in Malaysia, PAS and UMNO's involvement and encouragement for the Islamisation process has resulted in an environment that is congenial for the radicals to tap into. As long as PAS and UMNO continue their support for the Islamisation process, the narrative of IS is likely to resonate in the hearts of the radical fringe.

Adri Wanto is a Research Associate with the Indonesia Programme and Abdul Mateen Qadri is a Research Assistant with the Malaysia Programme at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.
